Jean Nicolet, the interpreteur and voyageur in Canada, 1618-1642 /

JEAN NICOLET, INTERPRETER AND VOYAGEUR IN CANADA. 1618–1642.1

1 Previous to 1852, Jean Nicolet was unknown to history as the discoverer of the Northwest. In his *Discovery of the Mississippi*, published that year, John G. Shea identified the Men of the Sea, spoken of in the Jesuit *Relations*, as the Winnebagoes, or “Ouinipigou” of those days. In the *Relation* of 1640, Father Le Jeune outlines the extent of Nicolet's explorations; and Dr. Shea was enabled, because of this identification he had made, to point out in his volume the fact that Nicolet was beyond doubt the first white man to set foot within what are now the States of Michigan and Wisconsin. But Dr. Shea had not pushed his researches further than to be able to say that this remarkable tour into the unbroken wilderness of the Northwest was made “as early as 1639,” afterwards placing it “in 1639.” This conclusion was followed by Western historians until 1876, when Benjamin Suite, of Ottawa, in his *Mélanges d'Histoire et de Littérature* (Ottawa, 1876, pp. 426, 436), showed that Nicolet's tour must have been made in 1634–5; M. Sulte's “supposition” being that “Nicolet left Allumette's island about September, 1634, and went to Wisconsin.” This supposition he amplified in a paper in *Wis. Hist. Coll.*, vol. viii., under date of August, 1877. In 1881, Consul Willshire Butterfield issued a monograph entitled *History of the Discovery of the Northwest by John Nicolet in* 1634, *with a Sketch of his Life*. In this valuable little work, Mr. Butterfield brought forth new facts and arguments, which fixed the date at 1634 beyond the region of doubt, and established an entirely new fact,—previously undiscovered by historians of the West,—that Nicolet did not discover the Wisconsin river, as had been previously assumed, but only journeyed up the Fox river as far as the village of the Mascoutins and then journeyed southward to the country of the Illinois.

At the editor's request, Mr. Butterfield has prepared a bibliography of the subject of Nicolet's career. With this bibliography, the present article by M. Jouan, Mr. Butterfield's monograph, and M. Sulte's article in Vol. viii, of these *Collections*,—with Dr. Draper's notes upon the last named,—the subject of Nicolet is practically exhausted, so far as the presentation of historical material is concerned.— Ed.

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH OF HENRI JOUAN,2 BY GRACE CLARK.

2 Post captain (retired), at the port of Cherbourg, France. The original article appeared in *Revue Manchoise*, 1st quarter, 1886. — Ed.

For some time, considerable attention has been directed in France toward Canada, concerning which, as we must admit indeed, but little thought was given until recently, when some travelers who are eminent publicists reminded us that there is across the Atlantic a country called “New France,” where there lives a population of French origin; that this population, even while it accepts certain accomplished facts not to be recalled, still preserves a filial veneration for the motherland, notwithstanding its separation of more than a century, still retains the faith of its fathers, and still speaks their tongue, which it deems a point of honor to keep pure from all mixture with the language of the rulers whom the fate of arms has placed over it. Thanks to their energy, I 2 their perseverance and their mutual understanding, the descendants of the French in Canada have preserved almost intact their primitive institutions; they take an active part in the administration and government of the country; their language is upon the same footing as English in the deliberative assemblies; in a word, they have made a wide place for themselves there,—a thing quite necessary, however, to attribute to their number and to their vitality, which is affirmed by its remarkable growth. In 1763, at the time of the cession of Canada to England, there were sixty thousand Frenchmen there; to-day the French Canadians number nearly three millions!

Most of our large journals quite recently published some letters that were addressed to them by the publicists, merchants, engineers, etc., who were members of the French delegation conducted by the curé Labelle, perhaps the most popular man in Canada, where the Catholic clergy, recruited from the population of French origin, exercise a very great influence; which delegation was to ascertain *de visu* the varied resources that this country offers and to study the means of establishing between it and France a direct run of business that should be profitable to both. These visitors are unanimous in declaring that the reception given 3 to “our people of France,” as we are still called there, exceeded all that they could have imagined; one of them goes so far as to say that he dare not relate all the kind attentions of which they have been the recipients, because he would not be believed. Their accounts are of continuous festivities of every sort, with addresses of welcome, picturesque excursions, and triumphal entrances, accompanied by the ringing of bells, into cities decked with tri-colored flags, among which some old banners adorned with the *fleur-delis* , still reverently preserved as relics, are here and there seen. The clergy in their altar garments, led by the great dignitaries of the church, came and received our countrymen at the doors of the churches that were adorned as for the greatest Catholic festivals and where the holy sacrament was exposed for adoration. It is but just to add that the reception given them by the English was no less warm nor less cordial.

The various provinces of France have coöperated in a greater or less degree in the formation of the French population of Canada, but it was the provinces of the West and Northwest that furnished the greatest number of emigrants; in particular, Normandy, whose influence is recognized to-day in the language, where we find certain turns of speech, certain meanings of words, still in use in our province. If one looks through the “Annuals” of the Canadian cities he will find there all our old family names. Almost all the employés of the company which was formed during the winter of 1613–1614 came from Normandy. The crews of the ships were furnished by the ports of Rouen, Honfleur, Fécamp, Cherbourg, le Havre, Dieppe, and Caen. These cities were the nurseries which produced the most useful interpreters.1

1 Benjamin Suite. *Les Interprètes du temps de Champlain;* “Memoirs of the Royal Society of Canada,” 1st t. 1883.—H. J.

In order to train these interpreters, the need of whom had been felt since the beginning of colonization, young men were taken, sometimes mere youths, and sent to live for some years in the midst of the “savages” as the natives were 4 indiscriminately called, in order to learn their languages and to become initiated into their customs. Some of these interpreters were highly gifted persons and much better instructed than the generality of colonists; it was from their ranks that Champlain was accustomed to choose his agents to explore unknown regions and to conclude treaties with the savage nations.

Among these *voyageurs* and interpreters there is one, Jean Nicolet, who occupies a prominent place in the very earliest history of Canada, and of whom the inhabitants of Cherbourg have the right to be proud inasmuch as the strongest presumptions—as I shall forth with show—permit them to claim him as a child of their city, or at least of its vicinity; and still I am much afraid that he is to-day unknown by the majority of them. Are there many among them who have read the extract from the *Relation de la Nouvelle France de* 16431 given by M. Pierre Margry in the first volume of his careful studies upon the *Discoveries and Settlements of the French in the West and South of North America* ,2 where the salient facts of his life and tragic end are related? If Nicolet is forgotten among us, he is not so in Canada, where his name is constantly recalled to the present generation by the seignory and county of Nicolet, Nicolet lake, Nicolet river, and the pretty city of Nicolet, in high tide of prosperity, which numbered 7,364 inhabitants on January first of this year, and in which is located Nicolet seminary, one of the first colleges of the new world. Quite recently a decree of the pope divided the diocese of Three Rivers and one of the sections became the new diocese of Nicolet, the titulary taking possession of it in July last.3 “If Canada had entered the era of statues, it would be high time that Jean Nicolet had his bronze in the city of Nicolet,” wrote a Canadian publicist to me, M. Benjamin

1 During a period of forty years, beginning with 1632, the Jesuits in Canada kept their superiors in France regularly informed of all that concerned the country; taken together, their reports constitute the *Relations*.—H. J.

2 1879. Paris, Maisonneuve.—H. J.

3 July, 1885.— Ed.

5 Sulte,1 who has given much attention to our compatriot. Moreover it is not only in Canada that an interest is felt in him; in 1881 a citizen of the United States, Mr. C. W. Butterfield, of Madison, Wisconsin, wrote a book2 in memory of the explorer who first showed the way to the vast territory that to day constitutes the States of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan and Wisconsin, of him whom he calls “the gallant Norman,” “the indomitable explorer,” “the courageous Frenchman.” Perhaps my fellow-citizens will find some interest in reading the following pages which I in my turn devote to Nicolet in order to make him known to them,—pages that sum up what I have learned from the publications to which I have just made reference and from the information that has been kindly furnished me by their authors.

1 At the present time president of the French section of the Royal Society of Canada.—H. J.

2 *History of the Discovery of the Northwest by John Nicolet in* 1634, *with a Sketch of his Life*, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1881.—H. J.

Jean Nicolet may have been twenty years old when he arrived in Canada in 1618. Canadian historians place his birth at about 1598, at Cherbourg. Positive proof of this last assertion is wanting; at least I have not been able as yet to obtain from Canada any information authorizing the fixing of his birthplace indisputably, but there is a strong presumption that he was from Cherbourg or its vicinity. According to his marriage contract drawn up at Quebec in 1637,3 he was the son of Thomas Nicolet, mail-carrier [*messager*

ordinaire] between Cherbourg and Paris, and Margaret Delamer, two family names still very common in Cherbourg and vicinity,4 and names that are found very often in the oldest titles preserved. Nothing surprising then if a Nicolet born in this district should have been mail-carrier between Cherbourg and Paris, and if one of his children,

3 See note at close of this article.—H. J.

4 The Nicollets of Cherbourg and vicinity wrote their name ordinarily with two l's; in the *Relations* of Canada we find without distinction “Nicollet” and “Nicolet” for the name of the explorer. It is the latter spelling that has prevailed in Canada and consequently I have adopted it.—H. J.

6 brought up in a maritime city, should have left his native country to go and seek his fortune in the lands beyond the sea.

On this presumption, M. Pierre Margry (who had become acquainted in Paris with a copy of the same marriage contract), in 1858, sought information at the mayoralty of Cherbourg, and obtained that which follows, gathered from the registers of catholicism of the church of the Holy Trinity, and deposited in the Hotel de Ville in 1792:

December 3rd, 1604: birth of Roulland Nicollet, son of Thomas Nicollet;

October 27th, 1605: birth of Thomas Nicollet, son of Thomas Nicollet;

December 15th, 1611: birth of Perrette, daughter of Thomas Nicollet;

August 13th, 1656: death of Jeanne Nicollet, daughter of the late Thomas;

December 14th, 1605: birth of Marguerite Delamer (possibly a first cousin of Jean, but, at all events, not his mother; the date would contradict it).

As one may see, there is in all this nothing about Jean.

During the last months of 1882, I resumed these researches at the request of M. Pierre Margry, commencing by examining the old catholic registers [*registres de catholicité*] of Cherbourg, which go back to June 12, 1549, but without success. There was nothing concerning the birth of Thomas Nicollet and of Margaret Delamer, their marriage, their death, nor the birth of a son named Jean up to the end of 1605. These records give only the births, and furthermore there is a break of eighteen years, from 1572 to 1591. The marriages and deaths are recorded only from 1610 onward, with a break from 1620 to Easter 1628.1 These old registers are otherwise very incomplete; the entries of births give only the family and christian names (usually only a single christian name) of the newborn, the father, the godfather and the godmother; the mother is not mentioned.

1 As appears from the marriage contract of Jean, executed in 1637, his father was dead at this last date.—H. J.

7 The entries of marriages mention only the family name and first name of the bride and groom and of the father of each. In the lists of deaths we find only the family name and first name of the father and again not always that. The registers kept by M. Groult, curé of Cherbourg, from 1628 to 1668, written entirely by his own hand, mention the baptisms, marriages, and burials, performed at Cherbourg, both at the church of the Holy Trinity and at the chapel of the chateau; but nothing affirms positively that before 1628 the clergymen of this chapel were not alone commissioned to keep note of the persons who were baptised, married and buried. May it not be that such was the case of Thomas Nicolet, Margaret Delamer, and their son Jean? We can affirm nothing, deny nothing, in this respect, since the records of the chapel of the chateau, which was pulled down in 1689, have not for a long time been in existence.

I have likewise sought the marriage contract of Thomas Nicolet and Margaret Delamer, and for that purpose have turned over from three to four thousand different documents, kindly placed at my disposal by M. Druet, a notary of Cherbourg—documents which were signed by M. Druet, royal tabellion, and his colleague M. François Landrin, from 1580

to 1603. I have indeed found numerous marriage deeds but not the one I was seeking; although it was in this interval from 1580 to 1603 that there was the greatest number of chances to discover it. I can even say that in all these deeds in which the Nicolets figure many times, I have seen but a single time (May 10, 1593) a “Thomas Nicolet, *bourgeois* of Cherbourg”; it must however be observed that there were at Cherbourg other notaries than M. Philip Delamer, and their minutes have been scattered or lost. There is nothing which says that the contract in question was not drawn up by one of these.

Canadian historians, as I said before, make Cherbourg the birthplace of Jean Nicolet, probably on account of the declaration that he made en arriving in Canada, that he came from Cherbourg, that he was from Cherbourg; but does this declaration specify that he was born in the city; or indeed, in saying that he was from Cherbourg, a city 8 already well known at that time in maritime and colonial circles, did he not better fix the ideas of those whom he addressed than if he had given as his birthplace a small locality entirely unknown? This supposition is not too bold, it seems to me, for we see the same thing done every day. This fact led me to conduct researches in the neighborhood of Cherbourg, chiefly at Hainneville, five kilometers from Cherbourg, where, out of 1,050 inhabitants, one can count thirty-seven heads of families bearing the name of Nicolet. I had besides heard some old letters spoken of that existed still in that commune; letters written long ago by a person who had afterwards crossed the sea. I was not more fortunate at Hainneville than at Cherbourg; the registers of births, deaths, and marriages go back only to 1660, and among the numerous Nicolets and Delamers who figure there I found nothing bearing upon Jean or his parents. The different Nicolets whom I questioned—especially the more aged of them—could acquaint me with nothing more.1

1 I had however a moment's hope. When I spoke of old letters I was told a story that had agitated all Hainneville nearly forty years before. At that time there was discovered in the Study of a notary at Laval, a will left by one Nicollet who had quitted the country long ago: an inheritance of eighteen millions that had not been claimed, was in question. Had this Nicollet any connection with the Canadian? Some anecdotes told me at Cherbourg might

have led me to believe it, but it was a mistake. A delegation of the Nicollets of Hainneville had repaired to Laval and to Rennes. One of the delegates was still living at Cherbourg. We were brought together and he told me that there was indeed a will and a valuable estate was to be inherited, but they had been obliged to admit that they had nothing to do with it. The testator was called Le Nicollais and was originally from another part of the country. I was ignorant of this when I presented myself at Hainneville; my questions caused the old story to be suddenly revived and at the same time excited a distrust towards me that people scarcely gave themselves the trouble to conceal. Evidently I had come for the millions; in vain I protested it was the first time I had heard them spoken of. I was not believed; I knew much more about it than I would say; I was simply an intriguer, a schemer for the inheritance. Some tried to cajole me by reminding me that they had been the first to give me information, that it was fair consequently that I should share with them. Others, more skeptical, but more kindly disposed, contented themselves with considering me an “innocent;” and indeed a person going from door to door, on a rainy November day, floundering about in broken up roads, and through muddy back yards, to look after some worthy fellow dead 240 years, could hardly be in his right mind.—H. J.

9

In other communes, my attempts were not more successful; therefore up to the present time nothing affirms positively that Jean Nicolet was born at Cherbourg or in its vicinity. There is only a presumption; but until a more fortunate, or more skilful, seeker shall have found certain proofs, may not this presumption, ought it not indeed, to be regarded as equivalent to a certainty?

Nicolet arrived as I have stated in 1618 in Canada, where “his temperament and excellent memory aroused great hopes for him.”1 He was a man full of spirit, daring, and at the same time deeply religious. He was sent very early (probably about 1620) a hundred leagues from Quebec up the Ottawa river, among the Algonquins of Allumette island (Champlain had ascended this river in 1615) in order to learn the language of the Algonquins which was then in general use in the west and on the north bank of the St.

Lawrence. He remained for two years among these savages without seeing a single European, living their life, “always accompanying the barbarians on their expeditions and travels, amid fatigues that cannot be imagined except by those who have seen them; several times he passed seven or eight days without eating anything; he was seven whole weeks without other nourishment than a little bark.”2 About 1622, he at the head of 400 Algonquins went to negotiate peace with the Iroquois and succeeded completely in the undertaking. Later he went among the Nipissings, or Algonquins of Lake Nipissing, fifty leagues farther to the northwest, and remained with them eight or nine years, becoming so to speak, one of them, adopted by the nation, taking part in their frequent councils, “having his cabin apart, doing his own fishing and trading.”3

1 *Relation de la Nouvelle France*, 1643.—H. J.

2 *Relation* of 1643.—H. J.

3 *Relation* of 1643.—H. J.

During this long residence among the Nipissings, did Nicolet 10 appear at all at Quebec? We cannot say, but it is more than probable that he did not leave the Indians while the English continued to occupy this city, from 1629 to 1632; and more than probable, also, that he with some other Frenchmen who were in the same situation, left not a stone unturned in order to harm the invaders in the minds of the savages.1

1 Benjamin Sulte, *Mélanges d'Histoire et de Littérature*, Ottawa, 1876.—H. J.

On the return of the French to Quebec, Nicolet was recalled there to be employed as clerk and interpreter of the Company of the Hundred Associates. It seems however that he may have requested his recall, alarmed for the safety of his soul,—I have stated that he had very pronounced religious views,—in a remote region where there were no missionaries.2 Without doubt, also, Champlain, who had resumed the government of the colony after the departure of the English, was delighted to see him again and to consul him concerning a

project that he was meditating, and one which Nicolet more than any other seemed to him capable of carrying out, owing to his intercourse with the Indians and the influence that he very quickly exercised over them.3

2 “He (Nicolet) withdrew only in order to secure his salvation in the use of the sacraments, for want of which there is great peril for the soul among the savages.” *Relation* of 1643.—H. J.

3 “…whom (the savages) he was able to control and to direct whither he wished with a skill that will hardly find its equal.” *Relation* of 1643. —H. J.

Champlain had ascended a part of the Ottawa river and visited the shore of the Georgian bay, in the northeast angle of Lake Huron, but his ideas on the region of the great lakes were still very vague, hardly defined at all in fact, in 1634.4 Lakes Erie, Michigan, and Superior were unknown to him; he had heard the falls of Niagara spoken of but to him they were no more than ordinary rapids. Still he had heard it said that toward the west, four hundred leagues away, there

4 Champlain's map of 1632 gives a fair outline of Lakes Huron and Superior and the Sault Ste. Marie; while the general features of the Fox-Wisconsin water-course are also given, although of course from hearsay, and placed north of Lake Superior instead of south of it. — Ed.

11 was a people that had formerly lived in the neighborhood of a distant sea, and called on that account by the Algonquins the “Tribe of the Men of the Sea.” It was told furthermore that this “Tribe of the Sea” held intercourse with people living still farther west who reached them by crossing a vast extent of water in large canoes made of wood, and not of bark, and who because of their lack of beards, their shaved heads, costumes, etc., seemed to resemble greatly the Tartars or the Chinese.1 With the aid of a little imagination and with no lack of willingness—one is always inclined to believe what one desires!—it was easy to discern this vast extent of water, the sea that separates America from Asia, the north

Pacific; and in the voyagers, the Chinese or Japanese. It was the opinion of Champlain, of the missionaries, and of the better informed colonists, that in pushing westward it would be comparatively easy to find a shorter road to China by crossing America, than that usually followed in rounding the cape of Good Hope. Ever since the time of James Cartier this idea had haunted the minds of men and they deceived themselves as to the real width of the American continent. They believed that it would be sufficient to penetrate two or three hundred leagues inland, in order to find, if not the Pacific ocean, at least a bay or some great river, leading there.

1 The first mentioned tribe were the Winnebagoes and the second the Sioux.— Ed.

Nicolet, during his long sojourn at Lake Nipissing, must have heard the same tales, as the Nipissiriniens went every year, it appears, to trade with a tribe removed from them by a five or six weeks' journey; and this tribe was supposed to trade with people living still farther who came by water in large wooden canoes.2 His curiosity must have been as much excited as Champlain's and we may suppose that they had spoken together of the problem to be solved—the discovery of a direct route to China,—and no one appeared more capable than Nicolet of clearing up the matter.

2 Benjamin Sulte (after F. Sagard, 1625), *Mélanges d'Histoire et de Littérature*, 1876.—H. J.

The 1st of July, 1634, two fleets of canoes left Quebec and 12 ascended the St. Lawrence river; one to build a fort in the place where to-day stands the city of Three Rivers; the other, under the direction of Father Brebeuf, to explore “the upper country”—to-day the Canadian province of Ontario—by ascending the Ottawa river. Nicolet was in the second fleet, and when the two expeditions met at Three Rivers, he, putting the stakes in place with his own hands,1 helped in the foundation of the city where he was to pass the last years of his life. Allumette island was reached after a thousand sufferings had been endured by these travelers who were unaccustomed to the life of the woods and who

were moreover hostilely received on the read by the natives; but this was no obstacle to a *coureur des bois* , a demi-savage such as Nicolet.2 Leaving Brébeuf at Allumette island he went first among his old friends of Lake Nipissing to make preparations for his voyage. Then, descending the French river which issues from Lake Nipissing and empties into the Georgian bay (northeastern part of Lake Huron), he visits the Hurons who inhabit this region and with whom in all probability he came to execute some commission given him by Champlain. From this time he sets out for unknown lands in a birch-bark canoe—a forerunner of the many steamers and ships that now plow the great lakes in all directions —with only seven savages, Hurons, for his entire crew and escort into a region where now arise agricultural and industrial settlements and populous cities, but which were then the exclusive domain of tribes of redskins whose number or names no one knew, and where the traveler could depend only upon the hunting and fishing for his daily subsistence. He begins by coasting along the north shore of Lake Huron, then, following the strait that leads into Lake Superior, he pushes to the place since called Sault Sainte Marie, where he remains for some time to let his men rest; then, crossing the straits of Mackinaw3 he enters

1 C. W. Butterfield, *loc. cit*.—H. J.

2 “Jean Nicolet in the journey which he made with us to the island, sustained all the hard work of one of the most robust savages.” *Relation* of 1635.—H. J.

3 Not crossing, but ascending.— Ed.

13 Lake Michigan: sailing1 up the large recess in its northeastern portion, Green bay,2 he arrives among the Menomonies at the mouth of the river of the same name,3 not faraway from the “Men of the Sea,” better known afterwards under the name of “Winnebagoes.”4

1 Paddling; sails were not used on canoes, in those days.— Ed.

2 Northwestern portion of Lake Michigan, not northeastern. The author's knowledge of local geography is faulty.— Ed.

3 Not known as the Menomonee river until long after.— Ed.

4 More correctly “Ouinipigou” from the word “Ouinipeg” by which the Algonquins meant “bad smelling water,” as salt-water was by them designated. “Ouinipigou” signified to the Algonquins, “Men of the Salt-water,” “Men of the Sea.” In the *Relations* and elsewhere the Winnebagoes are frequently called “the Nation of Stinkards” [*Nation des Puans*]; and Green Bay at the head of which they lived “la Bale des Puans:” this arose from the fact that the French, not taking into consideration the extension of the word “Ouinipeg,” translated “Ouinipigou” by the “Nation of Bad Smelling Water.” The writer of the *Relation* of 1640 protests against this interpretation: according to him this tribe should not be called otherwise than the “Men of the Sea.” (C. W. Butterfield, *loc. cit*.)—H. J.

They were the chief object of his expedition and he went into their midst while ascending the Fox river. But here I will let the *Relation* of 1643 speak for me; I think the explorer will be better understood as thus described by a contemporary:

“While he was occupying this office (clerk and interpreter) he was chosen to make a journey to the tribe called ‘The People of the Sea’ to conclude peace with them, and with the Hurons who are about 300 leagues farther west [east] than they. He embarked for [from] the territory of the Hurons with seven savages; they encountered a number of small tribes in coming and going; when they arrived there5 they drove two sticks into the ground and hung presents upon them to prevent the people from taking them for enemies and murdering them. At a distance of two days' journey from this tribe he sent one of his savages to carry them the news of peace which was well received especially when they heard that it was a European who brought the message. They despatched several young men to go to meet

5 The country of the Winnebagoes.— Ed.

14 the manitou, that is, the wonderful man; they come, they escort him, they carry all his baggage, Pie was clothed in a large garment of China damask strewn with flowers and birds of various colors. As soon as he came in sight all the women and children fled, seeing a man carry thunder in both hands. They called thus the two pistols he was holding. The news of his coming spread immediately to the surrounding places; four or five thousand men assembled. Each of the chiefs gave him a banquet and at one of them at least one hundred and twenty beavers were served. Peace was concluded…"

The Chinese costume that Nicolet wore in his first interview with the "People of the Sea" indicates that he expected to see some mandarin come to meet him, to whom rumor might have announced his arrival. As was ascertained later, the so-claimed Asiatics were no other than the redskins since known as the Dakotas and the Sioux.1

1 The Sioux are a branch of the Dacotah family.— Ed.

Nicolet had arrived at something like 400 leagues from Quebec; it was then that he became acquainted with the Mississippi, if not *de visu* at least by hearsay. Crossing the portage which separates the Fox from the Wisconsin river and descending the latter, he proceeded as far as its confluence with the Mississippi, being thus the first Frenchman to greet the "Great Water."2 Or indeed, when, having returned to Quebec, he asserted that if he had sailed three days longer upon a great river, he would have found the sea.3 Was this great river of which he spoke the Mississippi or merely the Wisconsin river whose course would have conducted him to the Mississippi?4 Under the influence of preconceived ideas,

2 The traditional translation of "Mississippi" by "Father of Waters" is erroneous; the true meaning is the "Great Water," the "Great River," from the Algonquin words *Missi* "great," *Sepe* "water", "river." (C. W. Butterfield, *loc. cit*.)—H. J.

3 Relation of 1640.—H. J.

4 It is abundantly proven in Butterfield's *Discovery of the Northwest*, p. 67, et seq., that Nicolet did not discover the Wisconsin river, but only proceeded as far up the Fox as the village of the Mascoutins,—probably in what is now Green Lake county, Wis.—and then departed southward, for the Illinois country.— Ed.

15 did he not take what was designated to him by the name of “Great Water” for the Pacific ocean or at least for a great water-course that emptied into it.1 The Winnebagoes spoke a language that differed radically from that of the Hurons and Algonquins; is it certain that he fully understood his interlocutors? These are doubtful points the discussion of which would carry me too far beyond the limits that I have drawn for myself;2 still one may ask why it was that Nicolet, believing himself only three days' journey from the sea, should not have gone and verified the fact; was it because he was so far convinced that he deemed this verification needless?

1 For a long while it was believed that the Mississippi emptied into the Pacific ocean; the contrary was made known only in 1689 by the explorations of the chevalier La Salle, and indeed it was necessary to wait seventeen years for the question to be fully decided by Lemoyne d'Iberville finding the mouth of the river by water. (Benj. Sulte, *loc. cit*.)— H. J.

2 See Benj. Sulte, *Mélanges d'Histoire et de Littérature*, 1876, and C. W. Butterfield, *loc. cit*.— H. J.

It appears quite certain however that he did not limit his journey to the Fox and Wisconsin rivers but that he proceeded southward into the territory inhabited by the Illinois. The *Relations* written after 1636 by Fathers Le Jeune and Vincent, contain indeed much information given by Nicolet upon the country and the people southwest of Lake Michigan.3 He was the first Frenchman to penetrate so far in that direction.4

3 This conveys a wrong impression. The author should say “southwest of Green bay,” or “west of Lake Michigan.”— Ed.

4 Benj. Suite; *Mélanges d'Hist. et de Litt.*, 1876.—H. J.

Retracing his steps he re-entered Quebec at the beginning of autumn 1635 with a rich store of observations of every sort, having acquired for French influence and by peaceful means only, large populations until then unknown. It is probable that he would not have ceased his adventurous travels had not the death of Champlain, which occurred soon after his return, suspended for a time this kind of undertaking. Nicolet was then stationed, in his office of clerk and interpreter, at the post of Three Rivers, the most turbulent 16 and uncertain in the whole country. He performed his duties here “to the great satisfaction of the French and Indians by whom he was equally and above all others loved.”1 Two years later, in October, 1637, he married at Quebec, a god-daughter of Champlain, Margaret, daughter of William Couillart, who arrived there in 1613 as carpenter and calker and later became a farmer.2 This name, Couillard, common in the department of La Manche, would lead one to believe that he was from our province.

1 *Relation* of 1643.—H. J.

2 Margaret must have been very young as her father was married in 1621. William Couillard (or Couillart, the name is written in both ways) was the second Canadian ploughman by order of date. He was one of the Frenchmen who remained in Canada during the occupation of Quebec by the English from 1629 to 1633. His posterity, as a general thing prosperous, is sufficiently numerous to-day to make it possible to form a battalion of 500 men composed of Couillards able to carry arms,— Benj. Sulte.

Nicolet owned in common with his brother-in-law Olivier le Tardif, general agent of the company, an estate which the brook of Belleborne ran through, hence the title of “Sieur de Belleborne” given to him in some documents of that time.

In October, 1642, while he was at Quebec, where for a month or two he had been taking the place of his brother-in-law who was spending some time in France, the Algonquins of Three Rivers took prisoner an Indian of New England, whose nation was allied to the Iroquois, our enemies. The unfortunate creature was to be put to death, not immediately, but after he had first suffered all the refinements of torture in use among the redskins; in vain the French agents and their missionaries interceded in his favor; their interference only redoubled the fury of the tormentors. It was then that Nicolet was sent for in the hope that his influence over the savages might save the prisoner. Nicolet did not hesitate a moment; his devotion was appealed to, and this devotion was to cost him his life;—but again let us hear the author of the *Relation* of 1643:

“I will add here a word about the life and death of M. Nicolet, interpreter and clerk of the gentlemen of the Company 17 of New France; he died ten days after Father Charles Raymbault, deceased Oct. 22, 1642.

* * * * * * * *

“M. Ollivier, general agent of the Company, having gone the year before to France, the said M. Nicolet went down to Quebec in his place, with great gladness and comfort that he could see the peace and devotion of Quebec; but he did not long enjoy it, for a month or two after his arrival, while making a journey to Three Rivers in order to deliver an Indian prisoner, his zeal cost him his life and he was shipwrecked. He embarked at Quebec at seven o'clock in the evening in the launch of M. de Savigny, which was going to Three Rivers. They had not yet arrived at Sillery when a gust of the northeast wind that had raised a terrible storm on the great river caused the launch to fill, and it sank to the bottom, having turned a couple of times in the water. Those on board did not sink at once but clung for some time to the launch. M. Nicolet had time to say to M. de Savigny: ' Save yourself sir, you can swim, I can not, I go to my God. I intrust to you my wife and daughter.' The waves tore them, one after another, from the boat which, capsized, swung back and forth upon a rock. M. de Savigny alone threw himself into the water and swam amidst the

waves that seemed like little mountains. The launch was not very far from shore but it was an intensely dark night, and it was so bitter cold that the edges of the river were already frozen. The said M. de Savigny, feeling his strength and courage failing him, made a prayer to God and soon after he felt the ground beneath his feet, and drawing himself out of the water he came to our house at Sillery half-dead. He remained a long time unable to speak, then at last related to us the fatal accident which, besides the death of M. Nicolet, a loss to the whole country, had cost him three of his best men and a large part of his goods and provisions. Both he and his wife bore this great loss in a barbarous country with great patience and resignation to the will of God, and with undiminished courage. The savages of Sillery, when they learned of the shipwreck of M. Nicolet, hastened to the 2 18 spot, and seeing him no more showed signs of unspeakable regret. It was not the first time that this man had exposed himself to death for the good and safety of the savages. He had done it often and he has left us an example of the life of a married man which partakes of the apostolic life and which leaves to the most fervently religious man a desire to imitate him."

* * * * * * * *

Some days later the prisoner was ransomed by the governor of Three Rivers and once cured of the injuries that the Algonquins had inflicted upon him, he was sent back to his country under the safe conduct of two christian savages. It is quite possible that the devotion of which Nicolet had given abundant proof and which had cost him so dearly, may have contributed to his deliverance.

Thus this good man died, in the prime of life, victim of a common accident, after hating escaped a thousand dangers during seventeen years of his life in the woods. One cannot help comparing this fate to that of Dumont d'Urville, perishing miserably at the gates of Paris in a railroad accident!

Two brothers of Jean Nicolet had come from Cherbourg to join him in the colony; one, Gilles, born at Cherbourg,1 a secular priest, arrived in 1635 and left in 1647; the other,

Peter, who was a sailor, left a short time after Jean's death. I have found no more trace of these two persons than of their brother, in the old deeds that I consulted at Cherbourg.

1 C. W. Butterfield, *loc. cit*.— H. J.

Nicolet has left no descendants of his name in Canada. His widow married again at Quebec in 1646 a man named Macard. She had given him but one daughter, and she married Jean Baptiste le Gardeur de Repentigny;2 several of their descendants occupy prominent places in the history of Canada. Jean Nicolet indeed was somewhat forgotten for

2 Ever since the beginning of the colony there have been certain ones in Canada bearing the name of Le Gardeur, distinguished from one another by a manorial name added to their patronymic. Did these belong to the family Le Gardeur de Croisilles who lived at Brillevast (canton of Saint Pierre Eglise)? There is every reason to believe so.—H. J.

19 a time. The death of Champlain, as I said, caused all the long journeys of the kind which he had accomplished to be abandoned, and later when these expeditions were resumed, attention was bestowed only upon those who had made them and their forerunner was no longer remembered. But this injustice has been fully repaired; to-day Jean Nicolet is openly recognized as the one who disclosed the way to the great lakes and the Western territory; neither is it in Canada only that the place due him has been given; the Historical Society of Wisconsin considers him the “Jacques Cartier” of that region.1

1 Benjamin Suite, *Les Interprètes du temps de Champlain*.—H. J.

Cherbourg may again claim as her own a man who has shone most brightly in the history of Canada. The chevalier “Louis Hector de Callières,” son of “James de Callières seignior of Rochechellay and Saint-Romald, marechal of the armies of the king and of Madeleine Pottier,” daughter of Pottier, seignior of Courcy near Courances. Biographers place his birth at Cherbourg. At first captain of the regiment of Navarre, then captain of the king's vessels, he was intrusted with several commissions to Canada which did him much honor

and procured for him in 1684 the government of Montreal and later in 1699 the general government of all the French settlements in North America. During the entire time that he filled these two offices he was obliged to struggle to the utmost against the English and their allies the Iroquois. He died at Quebec in 1703 in the prime of life, “as much regretted,” says Father Charlevoix, “as the most perfect general that this colony had yet had, and the man from whom it had received most important services, deserved.”2

2 James de Caillières (some biographers write “Caillères,” “Callières”), father of the chevalier, governor of the city and the castle of Cherbourg, may have been born in that city according to the abbé Demons (*Histoire de Cherbourg*, manuscript in the city library), and have died there in 1659 or 1662; according to others he was born and died at Torigny. He cultivated belleslettres and left several works. He was one of the founders of the Academy of Carn. Besides the chevalier Louis Hector, there was another son, François de Callières, seignior of Rochechellay and Gigny, born in 1645; but the same uncertainty exists as to the place of his birth; it is Torigny according to some, Cherbourg according to others. He has affixed his name to the treaty of Ryswick (1697) the negotiation of which did him much honor. He died in Paris in 1717 leaving several works in prose and poetry. He entered the French Academy in 1689.

Was the governor of Canada, Louis Hector de Callières, really born at Cherbourg? It would not be impossible in case his father, James, went in 1644, as the abbé Demons says (*loc. cit*.), to reside in the city of which he became governor a few years later. At all events there is little doubt that these three persons were originally from the department of La Manche. —H. J.

20

AUTHOR'S NOTE.

October 22, 1637.—Marriage-contract between Jean Nicollet and Marg te Couillart.1 Present in person honorable Jean Nicollet, Clerk and Interpreter for Messrs. of the

Company of New France, son of the late Thomas Nicollet mail-carrier between Cherbourg and Paris and Marguerite Delamer, his father and mother, the said sieur Nicollet now of Quebec,2 district of New France, attended by honorable François Derré, sieur de Gan,3 General Agent for the company, and associated with honorable Ollivier Le Tardif, Nicolas Marsollet, Noël Juchareau, and Pierre de la porte, all of the said Quebec, party of the first part.

1 The official copy of these marriage articles was very kindly and gratuitously sent me from Quebec without my requesting it, by M. J. Langelier, archivist of the province of Quebec, through the influence of M. B. Suite. —H. J.

2 Nicolet lived at Three Rivers, but as there was no notary in that place and as his future wife resided at Quebec, this city has been regarded in the deed as the domicile of the husband.— Benj. Sulte.

3 François de Ré (he signed Derré) called “Monsieur Grand” in several letters of that period.— Benj. Sulte.

And Marguerite Couillart daughter of honorable Guillaume Couillart and Guillemette Hébert her father and mother also of the said Quebec, also attended by honorable Guillaume hubout, Guillaume Hebert and Marie Rollet, grandmother of the said Marguerite Couillart, her parents and friends, party of the second part.

Which parties have promised and do promise respectively and with mutual consent and of their own free will, to take 21 each other with faith in the Sacrament of Marriage according to the Ecclesiastical forms made whenever it shall please the said parties and at their earliest convenience; and by this deed the said future husband has given and gives to, the said future wife for marriage portion the sum of two thousand pounds to be taken from his property real and personal, present and future, and wherever it may be both in old and New France, and from the most accessible [*apparens*] of his goods in case there shall be no children, issue of their body; and after his death likewise he has given and gives

besides, for her prefixed dower in case there be such dower, all and each of the annual revenue from his property, movable and immovable, and from that which may remain after the said sum of two thousand pounds taken as preference legacy by the said future wife in case she survives, wherever the said property be situated as was before stated, and provided always that the customary law shall not affect prejudicially the aforesaid prefixed dower to which the said future wife shall be from now on limited. In consideration and in view of this marriage, the said Couillart and Hebert father and mother of the said future wife have bound themselves jointly and severally to give to the said future husband whenever it shall please him the sum of nine hundred pounds by way of advancement, which sum shall be presented to him by the right of inheritance which she may have from the said parents after their death; and in case that the said future wife predecease the said future husband without heirs, issue of their body, he is bound to return such sum of nine hundred pounds to the heirs and assigns of the said future wife who shall be reimbursed by the said Couillart and Hebert as pertains to her condition and according to their power and convenience. And to the fulfillment of this and the foregoing the said parties have respectively bound themselves by the clauses and conditions contained in the present contract under pledge of all and each of their goods real and personal, present and future.

Done in presence of Claude Estienne and Etienne Racine Witnesses residing at Quebec, who have signed the first draught of these presents with the parties, parents and 22 friends as aforementioned, the 22nd of October, one thousand six hundred, and thirty-seven.

Nicollet (scroll).

Mark of the said Couillart.

Marguerite Couillart.

Guillemette hebert.

Mark of the said Hubout.

Guillaume hebert.

Marié Rollet.

Derre (scroll).

Marsolet.

Le Tardif (scroll).

Juchereau (scroll).

De Laporte (scroll) claude Estienne.

Racine (scroll).

Paraphé ne varietur.

Verrier, Vicar-general.

Du Laurent, Clerk.

Indorsed: “Copy conformable to the first draught found in the office of the late J. Gutter,1 notary for this part of New France now called Province of Quebec, deposited in the archives of this District, compared and collated by us the undersigned, Keepers of the same, and Prothonotaries of the Superior Court at Quebec, the eighteenth day of June, one thousand eight hundred and eighty-five.

1 The notary Jean Guytet, or Guitet, signed deeds at Quebec in 1637 and 1638. In one of them he entitles himself “notaire et commis greffier.” Nicolet's marriage-contract does not bear the name of Guitet, but the document was found in his office and recognized as being

by him by DuLaurent, notary and clerk at Quebec from 1734 to 1759, and by the Vicar-general Verrier.— Benjamin Sulte.

“ Burroughs & Campbell .”